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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001436

SIPDIS

STATE PASS AIT/W

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SUBJECT: MARCH 26 RALLY CONCLUDES PEACEFULLY, ROCKY ROAD

AHEAD

REF: TAIPEI 01403

Classified By: AIT Deputy Director David J. Keegan, Reason(s): 1.4 (B/D)

11. (C) Summary: The March 26 "Love Peace, Protect Taiwan" rally organized to protest the PRC's Anti-Secession Law (ASL) proceeded peacefully. The Pan-Green claimed it mobilized almost one million people, but actual numbers are difficult to determine and subject to an ongoing partisan debate. President Chen Shui-bian marched with supporters and led a folk song, but did not make a speech. His participation appears to have helped achieve the government's goal of preventing former President Lee Teng-hui from using the event to promote Taiwan independence themes. Nevertheless Lee's March 27 call for a "major adjustment" in Taiwan's cross-Strait policy suggests that the DPP might have difficulty in keeping him quiet for long. Opposition leaders were conspicuously absent from the march. KMT officials instead announced that they would send KMT Vice Chairman Chiang Pin-kung to the PRC to showcase the party's ability to handle cross-Strait relation in a less antagonistic manner. The divided domestic political attitudes and the publication of a letter by a pro-Green business leader allegedly under pressure from Beijing (Septel) to protect his business interests on the Mainland indicate that President Chen's expectations that the march would bring "closure" over the Anti-Secession Law may be premature. End Summary.

Peace and Love Blowin' in the Wind

12. (C) President Chen and the DPP mobilized several hundred thousand people on March 26 in Taipei to protest the PRC's Anti-Secession Law passed by the National People's Congress on March 14. The nominal organizer, the Taiwan Democratic Alliance for Peace, a Pan-Green organization comprised of 34 civil groups and over 500 societies, organized the day under the banner "Love Taiwan, peace, and democracy". This was the first major Pan-Green rally since the February 28, 2004 Hands Across Taiwan demonstration.

13. (C) The rally was peaceful with a carnival-like atmosphere resounding with music and song. The sentiments expressed by the crowd were very pro-Taiwan and pro-peace rather than explicitly anti-China, although there were several instances of PRC flag burning and a widely photographed image of people stomping on a sidewalk picture of Jiang Zemin. Participants chanted "Love Taiwan, Love Peace" and "Yes, Taiwan! No, China!" and sung several songs, including "We Shall Overcome." AIT observers noted that the overall mood and tone of the event was calm with no sense of impending threat. People carried flags, signs and inflatable batons bearing messages of peace and democracy. At the central rally site organizers erected a five-story-high white balloon representing peace and a large red sea urchin, its needles symbolizing the missiles the PRC has aimed at Taiwan. No major clashes were reported.

14. (C) The actual number of participants is the subject of ongoing partisan debate. Media estimates of attendance numbers varied greatly. The Taipei Times and Associated Press reported one million people took to Taipei's streets, while Taipei City Mayor Ma Ying-jeou cited police estimates of 275,000 participants. AIT observers reported that numbers were close to the turn-out for the March 13, 2004 rally which also was estimated in the hundreds of thousands of people.

President Chen Sings

15. (C) President Chen maintained a low profile, keeping to his promise of not making a formal speech. Accompanied by his family and several members of the Presidential Office staff, he marched along one of the pre-planned routes for about twenty-five minutes. The event peaked at 1715 Taipei time when he took to the stage and led the crowd in singing a Taiwanese folk song and chanting peace and democracy slogans. The energy amongst the people clearly spiked as he took to the stage, but Chen resisted the temptation to address the assembled masses.

KMT Criticizes Rally, Calls for Dialogue

16. (C) Pan-Blue leadership did not attend the rally, but officials did not bar individual members from attending. AIT observers noted that no Pan-Blue figures were on the scene. The KMT leadership publicly criticized the rally as an unproductive means for dealing with cross-Straits relations and a waste of resources. A more productive means for addressing the issue, according to the KMT, would be through dialogue with the PRC. KMT Chairman Lien Chen told press that the party's first official delegation to visit the Mainland since 1949, led by KMT Vice Chairman Chiang Ping-kun, will aim to "step up efforts to resume dialogue and work together for mutual benefit."

Comment: Rocky Road Ahead?

17. (C) The ASL, along with pressure on Taiwan business interests (Septel), will make it difficult for President Chen to use the March 26 rally to bring "closure" over the ASL and resume progress on liberalizing cross-Straits contacts. To further complicate matters, former President Lee Teng-hui, after being silent at the rally, on March 27 called for the government to follow upon the rally with concrete actions, including changing its "China policy" and dropping plans to negotiate direct cross-Straits travel links. Expectations of possible renewed pressure from Beijing and a deeply divided political front at home suggest that President Chen and Taiwan will have to continue down what Chen described on March 24 as "the rugged path full of thistles and thorns" before the government is able to return cross-Straits relations to the path it was on before the ASL was enacted.
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